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Why a church reveals secrets to the press

A RELIGIOUS movement's diligent research and sophisticated public relations have resulted in national newspapers publishing articles on subjects ranging from crop spraying to drug abuse in prisons.

The articles, which have appeared over recent months, stem from an apparent attempt by the Church of Scientology to improve its reputation after years of adverse publicity.

The movement's public relations officers, wearing pinstriped suits and usually carrying bulky brief cases packed with documents marked "secret" and "confidential", have become a familiar sight in Fleet Street news rooms.

The material they have been offering has often provided a welcome, if unsolicited, contribution to newspapers' inquiries into matters of public interest.

The Scientology-inspired stories have appeared in the Guardian, the Sun, the Times, New Scientist, New Statesman and the Daily Mirror.

Stories for which Scientologists have been at least partly responsible include:

- CIA funding of the British psychiatrist, Professor Hans Eysenck. The professor was unaware of the agency's involvement.

- The use and availability of an American chemical warfare drug, BZ, in Britain.

- The use of the "liquid cosh" (drugs administered for disciplinary reasons) in British prisons.

- The use of a dangerous chemical, 245-T, as a weed-killer in Britain.

- British involvement in American mind-control experiments.

The only price the Scientologists exact for their freelance contributions is an acknowledgement published with the stories that their organisation uncovered the information. Periodicals are usually happy to comply on the grounds that the movement's involvement in the stories should be known.

The placing of news stories by special-interest groups is familiar and accepted practice to the press. But the Scientologists' activities are worrying journalists because of the organisation's motives and history.

The scientologists intend the stories to shore up their theory that the organisation has been the target of a long-running conspiracy by such organisations as the CIA, the FBI, Interpol, America's Internal Revenue Service and the psychiatric Establishment.

The conspiracy theory dates back to the late 1940s, when the Central Intelligence Agency launched a research programme into the military potential of mind control. The research involved attempts to manipulate the mind through such methods as the administration of drugs, shock therapy and sensory deprivation.

At about the same time an American science fiction writer, Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, was developing his theory of dianetics, a pseudo-scientific philosophy on which the Church of Scientology was to be based.

The fast-growing popularity of Scientology in the 1950s inevitably brought the movement into conflict with the psychiatric profession—which considered it dangerous to mental health—and with a variety of government agencies.

The organisation was investigated by the Food and Drug Administration, which claimed that it was breaking American medical legislation; by the FBI, which suspected various criminal activities; and by the Internal Revenue Service, which contested a Scientology claim to tax exemption on religious grounds.

Scientologists claim that this official "harassment" was at least partly due to early assertions by Hubbard that dianetics was the only technique which could unearth what he termed "pain-drug-hypnosis"—mind control—and that for this reason the organisation was a CIA target.

As Scientology grew internationally during the 1960s it became the subject of similarly critical investigation outside the United States. Public inquiries were set up in New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and Britain.

Scientologists blamed the adverse findings of these inquiries on the organisation's "old enemies" back in the United States—particularly psychiatrists cooperating with the CIA.

The Scientologists' claim that they have been the victims of governmental and psychiatric conspiracy has been strengthened by the passing of America's Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation. This has facilitated disclosures about the original CIA mind-control experiments and the involvement of a number of leading psychiatrists.

The church now has about 65 researchers in America working full-time to unearth documents under the FOI. They are trying to uncover further evidence of governmental misdeeds, to support the conspiracy claim and to win a reputation for Scientology as a champion of the public interest.

Journalists are divided as to how the information offered by the Scientologists should be treated. Some argue that failure to publish authenticated material touching on matters of public interest would amount to censorship.

But others say that the reputation of the Scientologists for litigiousness—which is probably unparalleled—makes any critical press investigation of the organisation difficult, particularly in Britain with its prohibitive libel laws.

It is argued that, in the absence of such inquiry—and in view of the organisation's history—it is wrong to acquiesce in an exercise in news management which is intended to improve Scientology's public image.

That image took a particularly bad battering from the first public inquiry into Scientology, set up by the state of Victoria, Australia, in 1963.

The Board of Inquiry delivered a bitter indictment of the organisation, declaring: "Scientology is evil, its techniques evil; its practice a serious threat to the community, medically, morally and socially, and its adherents sadly deluded and often mentally ill."

Scientology's retort was equally bitter, denouncing the state of Victoria as "a society founded by criminals, organised by criminals and devoted to making people criminals."

Successive inquiries in New Zealand, Britain, South Africa and Canada—where Scientology was investigated as part of a wider inquiry into the "practice of the healing arts"—were more restrained in their judgment. But all inquiries were in some degree critical of the organisation.

Arguably the most horrendous evidence to emerge from these inquiries was the organisation's methods of dealing with its "enemies".

Declared "fair game" they could, according to internal instructions, "be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist... May be tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed." The "fair game" rule was dropped after adverse publicity.

The only British Government stricture on Scientologists is an immigration ban imposed in 1968. In 1969, an inquiry was set up, under an eminent QC and parliamentarian, Sir John Foster, which recommended repeal of the immigration ban. But it also recommended legislation to control the practice of psychotherapy.

Neither recommendation was acted upon. But after intensive lobbying recently by the Scientologists—including stage-managed "incidents" at airports—Mrs Thatcher's Government is considering repealing the immigration ban.

MPs are being canvassed for their views.

In 1968 the ban was imposed by the then Minister of Health, Mr Kenneth Robinson, who said: "The Government are satisfied, having reviewed all the available evidence, that Scientology is socially harmful."